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Smart playgrounds

No longer monkeying around, new playground designs are giving kids a physical -- and mental -- workout.

By Maria Elena Baca, Star Tribune

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When Randy and Shelly Corcoran, of La Crescent, Minn., arrived with their two young sons at the new play structure at Lake Nokomis in Minneapolis last month, they were surprised by the intersecting tangle of half-circles, nets, hoops, balance bobbbers and slides.

At first glance, the Evos play system, designed by Delano-based Landscape Structures Inc., looked more like a sculpture than playground equipment. Tanner, 7, and Ty, 4, didn't care. They scrambled up and down the Space Nets and across the Swiggle Stix, a queue of plastic bobbbers.

"I don't know what I was expecting," Shelly said. "After seeing [Tanner and Ty] on it, and seeing them get more familiar with it, I'm liking it more. It was a bit overwhelming at first."

After years of piecemeal playground assembly, further hampered by concerns about injury liability, there's a change afoot in American playgrounds.

Design is being driven by a desire to not only give kids' bodies a workout, but their brains, too. That means fewer of the multilevel play structures (those with platforms, bridges and slides) and more sculpture-like equipment that promotes free-flowing play.

Some of the nation's most innovative new playgrounds actually are deconstructed play spaces without any permanent play structures. A playground being developed by New York architect David Rockwell near the South Street Seaport in Manhattan will feature sand, berms, water, buckets, wheelbarrows and other toys that kids can move around.

At Adventure Playground, in Berkeley, Calif., kids play on forts they hammer and saw themselves. Frank Gehry, designer of Minneapolis' Weisman Art Center, has been commissioned to design a \$4 million playground in New York's Battery Park. The one-acre design will include a "green" comfort station with a green roof and vegetal walls.

There's more talk about integrating nature into green-starved city kids' playgrounds, with grassy berms and running water, and incorporating opportunities for kids to play together and collaborate on projects and games they create without interference from grownups.

"There are getting to be better design innovations that will keep kids playing longer and coming back more frequently," said Darell Hammond, CEO and co-founder of a Washington, D.C.-based playground advocacy group called KaBOOM. "That's when you know you've got a great place to play."

Break from the traditional

For Landscape Structures, it's a big step from the traditional equipment the company pioneered and continues to sell. Company co-founder Steve King said the system was designed to first attract kids and parents with its artistic design, and then give kids a reason to play longer. "If you make it attractive enough, they'll play longer and, once they're there, they get into it."

He said the system has an implied health interest, too, designed to develop balance, coordination, upper-body strength and agility. In addition, he said, children can practice planning skills, since the play is undirected and unconstructed.

The Evos installation on the north side of Lake Nokomis was part of a test project to replace aging play structures, said Lonnie Nichols, district planner for the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board. The system offers kids ages 5 to 12 a unique play experience as they navigate arches and bridges that connect in a spherical layout.

"The site seemed primed to test it there, so there it went, and it seems popular," he said. "Certainly, we would like to keep upgrading facilities. The ongoing challenge, of course,

is where does the money come from?"

This month, the city of Thief River Falls, Minn., will install a \$40,000 Evos system, in addition to traditional pieces such as swings and spring toys.

Peter Johnson, a member of the local Kiwanis, which is bankrolling the new playground on the north end of town, said there wasn't any resistance to the unusual-looking structure. "Once we saw this, we didn't look any further," he said. "We certainly hadn't seen anything like this."

Other Evos systems are being installed in Cambridge and Coon Rapids.

Childhood obesity is an underlying theme

The problem of childhood obesity isn't driving playground innovation, per se, but it's an underlying theme in many conversations. However, many experts in child development and health note that while playgrounds have a role to play in keeping kids fit, they're only one piece of the puzzle.

"The problem is, to be really effective, the kids have to do some kind of exercise continually, ideally for 20 minutes," said Dr. Dan Halvorsen, director of the Powercubed Exercise Medicine Center and Clinic at the Children's Hospitals and Clinics of Minnesota. "Most playground equipment isn't designed with that in mind. Usually, playground play is stop-start."

As co-director of the anti-obesity initiative at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, Jeanne Brady headed a project that combined a new playground with instruction for how to use it at a nearby elementary school. Kids got pedometers and learned about fitness, nutrition and decoding media messages about food.

"There was a whole process of re-educating and becoming aware of body and mind, in terms of becoming a healthy person," she said. "We need to think about a whole developmental process, in terms of activities around antiobesity, both physical and nutritional."

The best playgrounds, said Rhonda Clements, past president of the American Association for the Child's Right to Play, are those that allow children to use their ingenuity to create games, and to challenge themselves.

"If you watch a child on a playground for the first time, they'll start out lower, and gain confidence," she said. "Pretty much all educators and child theorists recognize that once a child has felt some security and control over their environment, then they'll test themselves a little more. Playgrounds should allow for that."

A report by the American Academy of Pediatrics released last fall celebrated the value of child-directed play, and mourned the lack of opportunities in schedule-driven families.

Even as communities are reaching further to create innovative destination playgrounds, Hammond urged caution, recalling that the bottom line is having places for kids to play, in their neighborhoods.

"The perception is that to get to places for kids to play, you have to get in a car and go to them," he said. "They are much more destination parks, as opposed to pocket parks which kids can go down to on a daily basis and actually walk, instead of jumping into a car. The problem is, sometimes the continuum gets stuck. What we don't want to see happen is building too many mega-playgrounds, and not having an array and variety of playgrounds."

King, co-founder of Landscape Structures, said the response to the Evos system has been unbelievable. "It has exceeded all of our expectations in all ways. We're seeing older kids on these structures and they're loving it. We've greatly increased the age range it's appealing to."

He said customer feedback has revealed other benefits: Teachers love the system because its open design gives them better sightlines for playground supervision. And maintenance workers are happy because there are no flat surfaces where graffiti can be applied.

Maria Elena Baca • 612-673-4409

ONLINE EXTRA

FOR VIDEO OF KIDS AT PLAY ON AN EVOS PLAYGROUND NEAR LAKE NOKOMIS, GO TO WWW.STARTRIBUNE

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